

# The National Museum of Singapore: A Case Study in the Representation of National Identity

Richard Harris

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*This is the second in a series of case studies exploring the relationship between national identity and its display in national museums.*

As a result of a 1995 reorganisation, Singapore currently has three separately designated national museums, all administered under the National Heritage Board, which also oversees the National Archives and the Heritage Conservation Centre. The three institutions are the Singapore Art Museum, a national gallery devoted not only to Singaporean art, but to modern and contemporary art from Southeast Asia; the Asian Civilisations Museum, specialising in the material culture of Asian countries other than Singapore; and the Singapore History Museum. This last is the building generally referred to by locals as the National Museum, and will be the focus of the present study, since, according to the brochure, it “explores the rich heritage of the people of Singapore, from our ethnic and religious diversity, to the struggle for nationhood.”

## The History of the Nation-State

“To understand the present and to anticipate the future, one must know enough of the past, enough to have a sense of the history of a people”  
(Lee Kuan Yew, 20 January 1990).

Through being a barely inhabited island Singapore was a special case in the Southeast Asian region as a whole. Nowhere else in the region experienced the same combination of commercial success and Chinese immigration that eventually formed the basis for a new state in which the descendants of ethnic Chinese were and are the dominant ethnic group (Osborne, 1988, p.105).

Singapore is a small island of 240 square miles just off the southern tip of the Malay peninsula, which is itself the southernmost point of the Asian mainland. As Osborne remarks above, its rapid development in demographic and economic terms from obscurity to significance was unprecedented in the region, and is entirely due to the island's geographical position — “a gift of the Fourth Ice Age” (Jessy, 1985, p.239). Climatic and environmental factors rendered the island unsuitable for productive agricultural settlements, and its rocky soil and mangrove swamps attracted few permanent visitors. A third century Chinese document mentions “an island at the extremity of land” that is taken to be Singapore, describing it as “inhabited by cannibals with tails who live along the sea shore” (Lee, 1998, p.11) and, somewhat more believably, according to one writer, “Tumasik (Sea Town) was an important Malay-Chinese-Arab trading port as far back as the Roman Empire” (Seagrave, 1995, p.124). After these unsupported mentions, there is a thousand-year gap before the collection of myths and histories known as the Malay Annals relates how the island came by its present name. In 1300, the Malay ruler Sang Nila Utama, possibly a legendary figure, arrived at the tiny village of Temasek (Seagrave's “Tumasik”), the origins of which are “lost in obscurity” (Turnbull, 1989, p.16), on the site of what is now Fort Canning Hill, to claim it for the recently established Kingdom of Majpahit, in East Java. From the ship he saw a strange animal on the beach; this was (wrongly) identified as a lion (singa), and the place was given the name Singapura: Lion City.

Although it could not support a large agricultural population, the island's position at the nexus of important trading routes, together with its profusion of natural harbours and inlets, made it not only a natural entrepôt, but also a natural base from which pirate galleys from various parts of the Malay archipelago could row out to attack sail-driven trading vessels such as Chinese junks that were stuck in the equatorial doldrums. Chinese chronicles of the fourteenth century relate how, after retreating with

their booty to Singapore's secluded creeks, the island could serve at least as a temporary home for this "transient population of trader-brigands" (Tung, 2001, p.171), and traces of structures found on the island have been associated with this period. Chinese records mention a 1320 delegation to the island in order to buy elephants, and in 1325 Singapura sent tribute to the Yuan emperor "probably" surmises a History Museum gallery guide rather startlingly, "in an attempt to gain recognition as an independent country."

The bid for independence presumably having come to nothing, at the end of the fourteenth century, Singapore became a vassal of the Melaka Sultanate. In 1511, however, the Portuguese arrived — the first Europeans in Southeast Asia — and captured Melaka, driving the Sultan and his court south, where they founded the Sultanate of Johore, considerably nearer to Singapore. At this time, according to a Singapore history book, the island supported a population of about 400, comprising mainly Orang Laut (Sea Gypsies), some Malays and some Chinese. At first the Sultan of Johore appointed only a harbourmaster to represent his interests on the island, but this post was later upgraded to that of a minister, the Temenggong, who was both the representative of the Sultan and the ruler of Singapore. "The stage" as Lee's history announces, skipping blithely over the next three centuries, "is set for the coming of Sir Stamford Raffles" (Lee, 1998, p.13).

In fact, although Lee's history, as well as many of the exhibits in the National Museum, stridently assert that "Singapore had a life before the coming of Stamford Raffles in 1819, as archaeological evidence shows" (Lee, 1998, p.11) and SarDesai refers to Raffles's knowledge of "the old kingdom [sic] of Tumasik" (SarDesai, 1989, p.88) as a possible factor in his selection of the island for a trading post, it does not seem that Singapore had very much impact on the history of the region, other than being "a pawn in the game between rival Malay, Javanese and Thai kingdoms" (Lee, 1998, p.12). By the end of the 18th century, however, European powers were firmly established in the region and involved in their own power struggles. The Dutch empire in the east, centred in Batavia, on Java, had finally managed, with local support, to expel the Portuguese from Melaka, and this act brought them into tense confrontation with the English, who had established a base in Penang in 1786. When Napoleon's armies overran the Netherlands in 1795, however, the exiled Dutch government was forced, in order to prevent their falling into French hands, to grant Britain the right to occupy their eastern possessions in "a friendly caretaker operation" (Turnbull, 1989, p.94). The absence of Dutch control, albeit temporary, gave British officials and merchants in the area a

splendid opportunity to consolidate their influence, a chance which Raffles, Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen on Java, seized with visionary promptitude.

Having obtained a rather vague commission from the Governor-General in Calcutta to establish another trading post in the Straits of Melaka, Raffles reached Singapore in January 1819 and made a dubious agreement with the Temenggong permitting the British to establish a trading post. A succession struggle for the Johore Sultanate enabled Raffles to have this deal ratified by the claimant not under Dutch control, and by February, 1819, a contract existed. As Turnbull writes: "The legality of these arrangements was shaky. The Dutch were furious, the Penang authorities jealous and the British government embarrassed" (Turnbull, 1989, p.97). The ensuing negotiations finally resulted in the 1824 Treaty of London, in which Britain relinquished its claims to Bencoolen and undertook not to interfere with Dutch control of Sumatra and the eastern Malay archipelago (the future Indonesia). In return, the Dutch withdrew their interest in the Malay peninsula and Singapore, and the following year the English East India Company united Penang, Province Wellesley, Melaka and Singapore as the Straits Settlements, administered from Penang.

Although the Straits Settlements struggled as a colonial economic venture, the new free trade port of Singapore grew rapidly. "Indian merchants, indentured laborers, and convicts from the British Raj, Bugi traders, Arab Malay merchants, and most of all, immigrants from the far-ranging empire of China populated the quickly expanding town" (Tung, 2001, p.173). By 1824 the population had grown to 10,683 inhabitants, reaching 52,891 in 1849 and 226,842 by 1901. Freed from Calcutta control, the Straits Settlements became a Crown Colony in 1867, and the opening of the Suez Canal two years later improved communications with London. Although administrative control nominally remained in Penang, "Singapore becomes the centre of British colonial power in Malaya. By the end of the 19th century, it is also the economic and Malay cultural centre of British Malaya" (Lee, 1998, p.24). The construction of a causeway between Singapore and the peninsula in 1923 symbolised the cultural contiguity, but Chinese immigrants had outnumbered Malays since the 1830s, and: "Non-Malay orientation . . . is towards the respective homelands" (Lee, 1998, p.24).

The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 was bitterly resented among the overseas Chinese in Singapore, who organised a boycott of Japanese goods and sent money and support to the mainland. When the Japanese drove the British out of

Singapore in 1942, therefore, they were particularly harsh on the Chinese community in retaliation for their pre-war anti-Japanese activities. On the other hand, they encouraged Indian nationalism and gave Malays administrative and educational opportunities they did not have under British rule. Apart from persecution of the Chinese, "Japanese policy also breeds disaffection between the British and the Malays and Indians when the war ends . . . unquestioning trust in British protection had been shattered forever. There is no going back to the old order" (Lee, 1998, pp.31-32).

British policy after the war first proposed forming a Malayan Union on the peninsula and administering Singapore as a separate unit, effectively ending the privileged treatment that ethnic Malays had enjoyed under the old British-Malay treaties of the 19th century. Politically aware Malays, concerned that the Malay identity would disappear under pressure from the better-educated and economically stronger immigrant populations, oppose this move and form the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). By 1948, a compromise has been reached in which Malays retained certain privileges in a Federation of Malaya, and Singapore is again excluded, as its overwhelming Chinese majority would threaten the Malay dominance of the peninsula. Although Singaporeans were upset at being cut off politically from the mainland, with which they had strong cultural, historical and geographical links, the main political issue is now independence from Britain, and "merger and independence become one inseparable idea as far as the people and political parties of Singapore are concerned" (Lee, 1998, p.39).

Over the next ten years, Singaporean representation on the Legislative Assembly gradually increased to the point when, in 1955, the majority of members was decided in the first General Election. The largest number of seats was won by David Marshall of the Labour Front, who became Singapore's first Chief Minister, and led an all-party delegation to London the following year to discuss self-government. These talks broke down, and Marshall resigned in favour of Lim Yew Hock, who led a second delegation to London in 1957 and obtained agreement on Singapore's autonomy, Britain retaining responsibility for defence and foreign policy. This instrument was signed in 1958 with elections scheduled for the following year; in the May, 1959 elections the People's Action Party (PAP) won 43 of the 51 seats and, in June, Lee Kuan Yew became Singapore's first Prime Minister. His inauguration was immediately followed by State Loyalty Week, in which the new country's anthem, flag and crest were revealed.

Significantly, the anthem was in Malay, the flag features a crescent claimed to symbolise “a country eternally young” (Lee, 1998, p.44), but which clearly is also a reference to Islam, and the crest features both the lion of Singapore and the tiger of Malaya. Merger with the Federation of Malaya, independent since 1957, was a priority, particularly as it was seen as a route to full independence.

The story of Singapore’s ill-fated merger with the Federation of Malaysia is a long, exceedingly complex one, involving questions of ethnic privilege, political rivalries, economic imbalances and fear of Communism. The Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, initially opposed to merger, in 1961 proposed the creation of a Federation of Malaysia, reasoning that the inclusion of the Borneo territories of Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei would offset the incorporation of Singapore’s Chinese majority. Lee Kuan Yew immediately launched a vigorous campaign for merger, arranging a referendum for September, 1962, which he won handily. Full independence for the new state of Malaysia, including Singapore, was further complicated by the withdrawal of Brunei from the proposed arrangement, by Indonesian and Philippine objections, and by Lee Kuan Yew’s uncharacteristically maladroit decision to declare independence unilaterally, 15 days ahead of the rearranged date.

The next two years of merger were plagued with difficulties over taxation, immigration, citizenship and political influence, coalescing in the two polarised attitudes of “Malaysian Malaysia,” the egalitarian conception of Lee Kuan Yew, and the “Malay Malaysia” of Tunku Abdul Rahman, which would preserve Malay privileges and, not incidentally, preclude any aspirations Lee might have to the leadership of Malaysia. The PAP was contesting elections on the peninsula, which was seen as “an effort to undermine the position of the indigenous people” (Jessy, 1985, p.499), and violated what the Tunku claimed had been a private agreement between Lee and himself. In 1964 in Singapore a race riot claimed 20 lives, and racial clashes between Malays and Chinese occurred in Perak and Johore. By 1965 the threat of further inter-ethnic violence was looming, and tensions had run high enough for Malaysia to expel Singapore from the Federation, a development shattering to Lee and most Singaporeans at the time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The separation of Singapore from Malaysia is not well understood by many Western scholars. Adam Roberts even brackets Singapore with Bangladesh and Eritrea as “leading examples” of postcolonial secessionist movements creating new states (Roberts, 1999, p.85).

Since 1965, relations between the newly independent Singapore and Malaysia have never been cordial, Lee in particular having been harshly critical of the larger country on many occasions. However, with the heavily-populated island dependent on the peninsula for water, the peninsula needing the island's economic advantages, and both countries perceiving the need to contain Communism, cooperation has been essential. Singapore in particular has been at pains to play down its Chinese character; although some 80 per cent of the population are ethnic Chinese, Singapore is described in government literature as a plural society with four official languages: Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English. In practice, Chinese dialects are widely spoken and English is the language of interaction across ethnic boundaries, most education and commerce. "More and more Singaporean Chinese have rallied around the banner of the state's cosmopolitan character, not so much because of the state's cultural and educational policies but because of its dynamic economy" (SarDesai, 1989, p.258).

Singapore's economic success since independence has been a remarkable achievement, mainly due to its free trade policies and an absence of official corruption remarkable in the region, but many observers are critical of the social price the country seems to have paid. It is effectively a one-party state; Lee Kuan Yew remained in office until 1990, when he handed the Prime Ministership to Goh Chok Toh, but still retains considerable influence as Chief Minister. Political opposition is discouraged, often through use of the nominally independent courts, and social engineering is openly espoused as state policy. Singapore is still a successful economy, but the regional currency crisis of 1997 has encouraged a certain amount of self-examination: "With success, the [Asian] tiger grew fat and lazy and too well-fed. It grew arrogant and thought that it was better and smarter than everyone else which was why it was so successful" (Lee, 1998, p.121). It has been said that the dominant themes in Singaporean politics since independence have been "survival, order, and prosperity" (Neher, 1991, p.121); now that these have been achieved it is likely that Singapore will now concern itself with issues of identity. "Singapore still is a multiracial, multi-religious and multi-lingual society where the issues of race, language and religion remain sensitive and with the potential for trouble" (Lee, 1998, p.121).

## The History of the National Museum

The National Museum of Singapore dates its origins to the founding in 1874 of the Raffles Library and Museum, an institution run by a committee appointed directly by the British Governor of the Straits Settlements. The Annual Report for 1876 indicates that zoological specimens comprised the bulk of the museum's holdings at this time, other collection categories being ranked in order of interest. "Ethnological specimens were relegated to the tail end of the list of eleven categories"(Chee, 1987, p.9), and limited storage space in the Town Hall, where the museum was initially housed, clearly limited acquisitions. In 1887, however, the Raffles Library and Museum acquired a handsome new building of its own on Stamford Road, which still houses today the National History Museum., and the 1887 Annual Report gives details of a purchased collection of Chinese artefacts, including women's shoes and musical instruments, indicating that the museum now had space to expand.

The Report of 1893 contains an interesting proposal that ethnological specimens be henceforth collected and exhibited in a more systematic manner, decrying what was obviously the 'cabinet of curiosities' approach to museum display whereby a pair of ice skates from Europe is juxtaposed with "a piece of cloth from South America, [and] a Kayan shield labelled Dyak" (Chee, 1987, p.10). This complaint presumably had some effect, for by the turn of the century the ethnological collection was considered important enough to merit a section of its own in the Annual Reports. Artefacts were acquired through a number of means, from purchasing entire collections from impoverished aristocrats to buying folk crafts from itinerant vendors, as well as sending out exhibitions "for the express purpose of obtaining zoological specimens and . . . collectible ethnological objects" (Chee, 1987, p.10). This acceleration of acquisition did not necessarily swell the collection; many specimens had to be periodically replaced as "the original natural history exhibits fell prey to mold, ants, and the dust that entered the building through unglazed window openings" (Kelly, 2001, p.87). Although the collection of ethnological objects gained momentum in the early years of the 20th century, the museum generally saw itself as an institution preoccupied with natural history and archaeology, all its curators in these years being zoologists, botanists and ornithologists. According to Chee, "tigers and crocodiles shot in Singapore were reportedly among the more popular exhibits" (Chee, 1987, p.11).



The Second World War had remarkably little impact on the life of the museum. Although the Director, F.N. Chasen, was killed at sea during the evacuation and his deputy, C.A. Gibson-Hill, was incarcerated in Changi, the Japanese Civil Governor of Singapore during the occupation, Yoshichika Tokugawa, was himself a natural scientist who spoke fluent Malay and became President of the museum, maintaining his office in the building and therefore ensuring that “the Museum escaped the wholesale looting that was the fate of many private homes, commercial establishments and public institutions” (Chee, 1987, p.12). The museum was also used as a storage facility for valuable objects in other public buildings in the city, such as a collection of valuable books and documents from the library and the painting by John Singer Sargent of former Governor Sir Frank Swettenham that is now the pride of the museum’s collection of historic paintings. Annual Reports were not produced during the three years of the Japanese occupation, however, and some items, inevitably, were lost.

Annual Reports resumed publication along with civilian British control of the museum after the war, and the 1949 Report recorded a change in the museum’s structure which gave the ethnological and historical collection equal status with natural history, appointing curators for zoology and anthropology. Dr Gibson-Hill was appointed curator of zoology, but his scholarly interests included ethnology and archaeology, and he published many papers on a very wide range of topics during his tenure at the museum, including numerous field trips and collecting expeditions in the Malay peninsula and Borneo. He was Director of the museum between 1956 and 1963, and his influence on the institution has been significant, not least in the number of museum personnel who worked with and were trained by him. In 1955 the Raffles Museum was formally dissociated from the library, and in 1960 it was renamed the National Museum, under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture.

Subsequent to independence, in the 1960s Singapore instigated an ambitious programme of wholesale urban renewal, which in the eyes of many “destroyed the ambience and most of the buildings of the colonial emporium” (Tung, 2001, p.183). Nevertheless, the redevelopment benefitted the museum by making available a new range of artefacts from historical Singapore, facilitating the construction of a distinctly local collection, as opposed to a representation of the region as a whole, and arousing interest in the city-state’s individual history. “Sections of architectural facades, old street and shop signs, interior fittings and exterior elements of homes, religious and commercial

establishments have been donated or acquired at minimal cost” (Chee, 1987, p.13). As a result of these new acquisitions, in the 1970s the museum “began to metamorphose from a collection of objects reflecting the natural world into a historical and cultural record of Singapore and Southeast Asia” (Kelly, 2001, p.87). The interest generated by this new focus on local history encouraged the museum to conduct two archaeological excavations on Fort Canning Hill in 1984, which provided tangible evidence of Chinese trading links in the fourteenth century. By 1987, as summarised by Eng-Lee Seok Chee, the museum’s shift of focus was complete: “Departing from the early preoccupation with the manifestations of the natural environment, it has come to take the works of man as its primary concern” (Chee, 1987, p.14).

In 1993 the National Heritage Board was formed to administer the National Museum, which would now comprise three component institutions: the Singapore Art Museum, the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore History Museum. The Art Museum would be a gallery of contemporary regional art, the Asian Civilisations Museum would represent all those cultures that have contributed to the formation of Singapore, and the National History Museum would focus exclusively on what the gallery guide terms “700 years of Singapore history.”

## The Building and its Physical Setting

“Brace yourself for an unusual tour of thrills and surprises, bizarre incidents and weird tales of this 113-year old building” advises the National History Museum Visitor’s Guide in advertising its evening tour: “Definitely not for the fainthearted!” Participants are guided via the “infamous spiral staircase” up onto the rooftop, whence they can “discover for themselves the sights at the top of the museum.” Unashamedly populist, the tour nevertheless makes good, imaginative use of the asset that the eclectically handsome Classical revival building represents. Constructed in 1887 to a challenging design by Henry McCallum, the first of the Chinese contractors given the task of building the museum was driven to madness and suicide by the difficulties of the towering dome. The second contractor managed to finish the job, and the resulting rotunda is indeed impressive, although when Kristin Kelly calls it “one of the great indoor spaces in Singapore” (Kelly, 2001, p.90), she is not saying much, as there is little remaining competition. The building was extended in 1907 by adding a long gallery at

the rear of the original structure, an imaginative conversion that succeeded in doubling the interior display space of the museum without detracting from the external appearance. Further smaller additions have been made since then, but all in keeping with the original style and appearance.

Without doubt, part of the museum's appeal as a building resides in its rarity, in the fact that Singapore has destroyed so much of its architectural heritage, vernacular and colonial. Handsome though the museum is, it is an isolated monument, cut off from the life of the city by busy roads and towering shopping malls, an arresting relic in Singapore's relentlessly modernist urban landscape. In 1822, Raffles had set out a plan for the city's development centred on "two architecturally dramatic zones" (Tung, 2001, p.182), Neo-Classical civic buildings on one side of the Singapore River, eclectic commercial buildings on the other, and this concept was more or less followed over the course of the next century, different cultural traditions combining to produce a uniquely eclectic mix of architectural styles, a Singapore vernacular. Little attention was paid to residential planning, however, and by the time of the second World War, Singapore's population explosion had given rise to appalling slum districts as well as elegant vistas. Following independence, it was understandable that the city-state should want to reinvent itself as a modern city, but it was indiscriminate in its destruction of everything old: "In the effort to secure a better future, Singapore cut out the heart of the historic city, eviscerating the cultural ambience from which its success had sprung" (Tung, 2001, p.170). Too late, the government came to appreciate its architectural heritage and its potential benefits; a Preservation of Monuments Board was created in 1971, but in the next 10 years had listed only 20 individual structures and no historic districts. A report on declining tourism revenues commissioned by the Singapore government in the late 1980s concluded justly that "in our effort to build up a modern metropolis, we have removed aspects of our Oriental mystique and charm best symbolised in old buildings" (cited in Tung, 2001, p.185).

The National Museum building therefore symbolises simultaneously two periods of Singapore history: both its colonial heritage and, by the anomalous nature of the building's very survival, the postwar transformation of the city by a well-meaning but short-sighted government determined to modernise at all costs. The building's appearance, while elegant in itself, is nevertheless diminished in relation to the context of the city; for a Neo-Classical structure it almost looks quaint, rather than authoritative;

apologetic, rather than imposing. The structure is impeccably maintained, however, gleaming white under the tropical sun, the square austerity of its lines softened by dark green louvered arched window shutters. The central dome, also white, rises majestically above the two-floor edifice, a continuous band of stained glass windows near the apex imbuing it with an airy fragility. The grounds of the museum are limited in area are not used for exhibits, but tropical shrubs and palm trees add colour and texture to the overall impression. Two small shops flank the entrance to the museum, selling mainly books, cards, posters and souvenirs of Singapore; just inside the entrance is the ticket counter and information desk. The interior is spotlessly clean, well-lit, and attractive. There is no coffee shop, refreshments being limited to a vending machine in a corner of the small courtyard. Two suggestion boxes, one on each floor, encourage visitor feedback.

## The Stated Mission of the Museum

The 1998 annual report of the National Heritage Board, the government organisation responsible since 1993 for Singapore's three national museums and other heritage institutions, contains a reasonably concise statement of the perceived function of the museum: "The mission of the Singapore History Museum is to explore, discover and enhance the national identity of Singapore by preserving and interpreting the nation's history and material culture in the context of its multi-cultural origins" (Quah, 1999, p.5). Later in the report this conception of the rôle of the museum is put in the context of "our national effort to impart a better understanding of our history to Singaporeans" (Quah, 1999, p.11), and the museum guide, outlining the history of the institution, notes that the name change from the Raffles Museum to the National Museum "was adopted to reflect the Museum's pivotal role in nation building." The museum's target audience has been further clarified by the Director, Lim How Seng, as what he has termed the museum's "emphasis on national education programmes for visitors, especially students and younger Singaporeans" (cited in Quah, 1999, p.44). Clearly then, the museum is seen as an educational institution for the benefit in the first case of native Singaporeans, and not primarily as a tourist attraction or even a research facility.

This impression was confirmed by the Chief Curator, Mr Iskander Mydin, who explained further that the museum was seen as an integral part of the national education movement, an initiative involving a number of different public institutions who were

working together to improve educational standards and raise consciousness of Singaporean identity. The Singapore government in fact funds tours of the museum by groups of schoolchildren as a mandatory part of the curriculum. As for national identity, Mr Mydin defined this in terms of three values: meritocracy, cosmopolitanism and multiracial equality. The meritocratic value stresses the nature of Singapore as an opportunity culture, a “level playing field” as Mr Mydin put it, with no quotas and no privileges. Although he did not express it in as many words, the contrast with Malaysia and its pro-Malay policies was strongly implied. The cosmopolitan value is based on the perception that Singapore only exists because it has been able to supply things that people from outside its borders want. For this reason, it must be continuously open to ideas from outside, receptive to new demands and sensitive to external changes. The idea of an isolationist Singapore, said Mr Mydin, is a contradiction in terms. Multiracial equality seems almost to be a necessary consequence of the first two factors, in that any discrimination on ethnic grounds would violate the meritocratic principle, and since Singapore needs to interact with the outside world in order to prosper, it can only do so on the basis of equal treatment for all.

Lim Seam Kim, the Chief Executive Officer of the National Heritage Board has also sketched out future goals for the museum, which will include developing the outreach program to take the museum’s message to “a wider, bigger audience” (cited in Quah, 1999, p.29). The first venture of this outreach effort was a multi-media presentation of Singapore’s history entitled “The Singapore Story,” which was shown at nine different locations in the city, including community centres and shopping malls, as part of a travelling exhibition before returning to the National History Museum to become a permanent exhibit. The integration of the museum into the national education system has been mentioned above, and the museum is also hoping to expand its base of repeat visitors by introducing membership schemes and family passes. Although education and awareness enhancement for Singaporeans remain the primary goals of the museum, the Director, Lim How Seng, also hopes that the institution can serve to “showcase Singapore’s unique and diverse cultural heritage . . . to visitors” (Quah, 1999, p.46). At present, students of all age ranges make up about half the visitors to the museum, the others being divided equally between locals and tourists. Mr Mydin feels that these proportions are about right; “we just need to increase the numbers.”

## Political and Financial Control

Following Singapore's independence, the National Museum, as it was then, was made an autonomous department of the Ministry of Culture. In 1968 it came under the wing of the Ministry of Science and Technology, but this arrangement only lasted 4 years, and the museum returned to the Ministry of Culture with a redefined mandate as "an institution devoted to the history, ethnology and art of Singapore and its neighbours" (Chee, 1987, p.8). In 1993, the National Heritage Board was formed with a mission to "explore and present the heritage and nationhood of the people of Singapore in the context of their ancestral cultures, their links with Southeast Asia, Asia and the world through the collection, preservation, interpretation and display of objects and records" (Quah, 1999, p.3). Nominally free of direct government control, the National Heritage Board has responsibility for administering the three National Museums and the National Archives, as well as coordinating activities with departments such as the Ministry of Education and private bodies.

The total budget for all four institutions is set by the national government and paid to the National Heritage Board, which then allocates sums to each museum according to stated needs and requisitions. The three National Museums in particular are expected to cover a certain amount of their operating expenses, and outside sponsorship is actively pursued, either for the museum as a whole or for individual exhibits. As the museum guide optimistically asserts: "Having a diverse set of exhibitions and myriad public outreach programmes allows the Singapore History Museum to offer an assortment of opportunities for corporate sponsors to support the nation's repository of memories." As the museum system is considered an integral part of the national education curriculum, the budget is usually generous; but in 1998, at least, the National Heritage Board "was not spared the impact of the tough economic conditions that Singapore went through during the year. Sponsorships, donations and loans of artefacts were difficult to secure" (Quah, 1999, p.12). Admission to the museum costs 3 Singapore dollars, a very reasonable amount by Singapore standards, and there are concessions for children and senior citizens, as well as free entrance on national holidays. Frequent free tours are organised by the Friends of the National Museum, an official volunteer society that supports the institution in various ways, including the training of docents and the planning of fundraising activities. All of the tours are in English, except

for one a week given in Japanese. Visiting school groups have separate arrangements made for them, the accompanying teachers receiving specialised training from museum staff.

Although direct political influence is officially absent, the curatorial staff of the museum is well aware of the expectation it is under to serve the national interest. According to one of the curators I interviewed, one member of the museum's advisory board, although a relatively young man and therefore without much authority in traditional Chinese culture, is nevertheless known to be a protégé of "the Old Man," Lee Kuan Yew, and, it was wryly suggested, his is the opinion that generally prevails. The invisible control suggested by this anecdote was confirmed by Mr Mydin, the Chief Curator, when I asked him about the degree of freedom enjoyed by the professional curatorial staff in terms of the content and style of exhibitions. In 2001, a controversial new law was passed banning the wearing of the tudung, or Muslim women's headscarf, in national educational institutions, causing a great deal of resentment among the Malay community. I asked Mr Mydin whether it would be politically possible for the museum to mount a small exhibition based on this controversy, and he was very definite that it would not. He did think that it might be possible to allude to the issue by mounting an exhibition on, say, traditional dress of the constituent Singaporean communities — the camouflage technique, he called it — but that otherwise a museum initiative on such a sensitive issue would not be seen as appropriate.

On the more general issue of whether the museum saw itself primarily as a repository of truth or a forum for dialogue, Mr Mydin felt that the institution was at a watershed. Many of the younger curators felt strongly that differing views on historical developments such as colonialism, the split from Malaysia, inter-ethnic riots and other potentially controversial subjects should be presented, but their influence was minimal. Museums, he explained, were not seen as a good career option in Singapore, and there was no locally available museum studies course. Curators tended therefore to be either administrators or specialists, the former not having the academic expertise in a subject to appreciate the subtleties of alternative explanations or approaches, the latter not having the bureaucratic access to decision-making authority necessary to have these different approaches presented. A museum bulletin, the "Heritage Journal," has been recently revived after a ten-year hiatus, and Mr Mydin and his colleagues are hopeful that this publication may provide a vehicle for the airing of less orthodox perspectives on

Singapore's history. Given the Singapore government's record on censorship, however, there is room for doubt; as Stan Sesser notes, government control over printed matter is so complete that "a bookseller as well as a book's author and publisher can be subject to a libel suit" (Sesser, 1993, p.56), and it is unlikely that a government publication would be permitted to contain anything deemed too controversial.

## Divisions and Themes

The entrance to the museum is on the north side of the building and leads directly into the rotunda, a soaring space that gives the impression of a much larger and higher construction. A wide staircase opposite the entrance gives access to the second floor, and a passage behind the staircase leads across a small courtyard to the 1907 extension wing. One end of the courtyard is occupied by administration offices, and the other is the location of the Audio-Visual theatre, the venue for the 3-D "Singapore Story" film. The floor plan is replicated fairly exactly on the second storey, an enclosed mezzanine bridge connecting the rotunda with the extension galleries. The rotunda is not used as a major exhibition space, and the square footage of the museum available for display is limited. The use of the various gallery spaces is here described from the ground floor upward, with quotations from the separate gallery guides, as well as the overall museum guide.

The gallery on the left side of the rotunda, the east, is known as the Singapore History Gallery and contains a permanent exhibition of 20 small dioramas that trace "the history and development of Singapore from a fishing village to a modern nation state." The hand-carved wooden reproductions were made between 1982 and 1984 by artists from the Ayala Museum in the Philippines, based on research done by the Singapore museum staff, and are said to be accurate to "the colour of the thread used to tie the pigtailed worn by the Chinese men." On the opposite side of the rotunda is the Goh Seng Choo Gallery, devoted to drawings and watercolours of the natural history of the Straits Settlements. 35 pictures are on display at any one time, and are rotated every three months. These were commissioned from local Chinese artists by William Farquhar, the first Resident of Singapore (1819-1823), and the gallery also highlights Farquhar's life and career with the East India Company.

Occupying the eastern end of the extension wing behind the rotunda is the



Cendana Gallery, containing a permanent exhibition entitled “Singapore 700 Years.” Making use of archaeological finds and historical documents, the exhibition traces the history of the island back to 1300, “centuries before Raffles founded Singapore in 1819,” when the settlement “was a flourishing port.” At the opposite end of the wing is a small lecture theatre and also the Children’s Discovery Gallery, a facility for children from 7 to 12 years of age where they can “learn about Singapore’s history and heritage through interactive activities and role-playing.” Between the rotunda and the extension wing is the “AV Theatrette,” where “The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds” is currently shown, “a 3-D experience” that relates “Singapore’s history, from the colonial period through the communist threat and the battle for merger, till present day Singapore.” The 35-minute film is shown 5 or 6 times each day, but always in English, with one show each in Mandarin and Malay on Sundays. There is no Tamil soundtrack.

The handsome staircase, which divides at an imposing bust of Raffles halfway up, leads to the second level of the museum, where the east side of the rotunda is occupied by the Peranakan Gallery, a walk-through recreation of a traditional rumah baba, or straits-born Chinese house from the turn of the 20th century. The Inai Gallery on the opposite side is the largest single exhibition space in the museum and features the permanent exhibition “From Colony to Nation,” which deals with “Singapore’s struggle after the Second World War” and enables visitors “to grasp the sensitivities and tensions that arose in the process of Singapore’s nation building.” Also sharing this space is the “Object Think” exhibition, mounted in 2002, featuring “old artefacts in modern Singapore,” household objects from Singapore’s postwar history and intended to supplement the story of the larger historical events with domestic details.

On the north side of the upper rotunda, above the portico, is the Cengkeh Gallery or “The Jade House,” housing 300 pieces from the jade collection of Aw Boon Haw, “the Tiger Balm King.” The galleries across the bridge in the extension wing are mainly used for temporary exhibitions, although there is one permanent display on “Entering the Hung Gate,” a history of secret societies in Singapore. The main temporary exhibition in early 2002 in the east wing was called “History on Canvas,” and was a collection of oil paintings of former British Residents and Governors, Singaporean Presidents and the British royal family, as well as some views of early 19th century Singapore. Prior to this exhibition, a fascinating display of propaganda posters produced by both sides in the Pacific War was mounted in one part of the gallery, while another part of the space was

devoted to the Hainanese community in Singapore.

## Exhibition Strategies

Most of the galleries in the Singapore History Museum make use of fairly conventional display strategies by contemporary standards. They are nearly all cased and labelled, with no interactive features outside the children's gallery. The new "Object Think" exhibition is a little more adventurous in that it displays some items in open areas, seemingly (though not explicitly), encouraging their handling by visitors, although I never saw anyone do so. There are several video monitors in the galleries, although they are all playing constantly rather than subject to visitor control, and there are no interactive computer exhibits. While this general "show and tell" approach is understandable and justifiable in the exhibition of fragile or valuable objects, such as the jade collection, it has the unfortunate effect in many of the galleries of imparting what many Westerners may perceive as a deadeningly didactic tone to the museum. Nevertheless, the museum has taken different approaches to the three main periods in Singapore's history, and these provide a certain measure of variety. "Singapore 700 Years" uses archaeological objects, pictures and documents to present mainly the pre-colonial history of Singapore; "From Colony to Nation" covers the postwar period making extensive use of video and photographs; while "The Dioramas" deals with the colonial period, overlapping slightly at either end. The presentation of "The Singapore Story" supplements the gallery displays as it "takes you through the entire span of Singapore's history" in a 35-minute "experience to remember."

The dioramas are said to be the most popular exhibit in the museum, and are placed in the most accessible gallery from the entrance; they have their own explanatory booklet, and can be assumed to be one of the most important exhibits from the museum's point of view. Lit from within and set at chest height into an internal wall around which the visitor walks, they resemble small shop windows, or doll houses, each one devoted to an episode in the history of Singapore mostly since the arrival of Raffles in 1819, although the first diorama in the series shows the British Resident examining the remains of Temasik in 1823, and the second presents a village of Orang Laut in 1818.

Raffles is shown in the third diorama, accompanied by a soldier on the way to his historic meeting with the Temenggong. The succeeding 17 dioramas are a rather odd

mixture of period snapshots and historical reconstructions, some with a suggested political agenda reinforced by the accompanying signboards, which are in English exclusively.

Malays are not featured in any of the scenes after the first few, and the Indian community is the subject of only two: the first of these shows Indian convict labourers constructing Government House in the 1860s and the second shows the “Little India” of Serangoon Road in the 1890s, where the Indians “continued with their traditional occupations like money-lending, cattle-rearing, retailing and construction work.” A scene of the 1938 opening of the Naval Base Dock, part of “Fortress Singapore” and presided over by the beplumed British Governor, is ironically followed by one on the “Japanese Victory Parade” of 1942, the signboard explaining that “the British were not prepared and underestimated Japanese strength.” The next scene shows the Japanese screening the Chinese population, who “bore the brunt of Japanese brutality.” Diorama 17 shows the City Day celebrations of 1951, in which “all communities took part” but only Chinese are shown. The next scene is the “Communist Inspired Riot” of 1955, when “The Malayan Communist Party whose aim was to establish a Communist Malaya including Singapore, created a lot of unrest.” The final diorama shows the meeting of the first parliament in 1965, the right hand side of the chamber conspicuously empty. The signboard explains that the opposition party boycotted the session, but does not explain why.

An interesting feature of this gallery is the inclusion, on the outside wall more or less opposite the “Japanese Occupation” and “Communist Riot” dioramas, of a series of four blatantly propagandistic posters proclaiming “Total Defence Day,” which is “a time for us to remember this very different Singapore — one under the control of a foreign power.” The foreign power explicitly alluded to is Japan, but there may be an oblique reference to the British colonial period and a suggestion of the potential threat posed to Singapore by Malaysia and Indonesia. Total Defence is the responsibility of all citizens, and is said to have five aspects: Civil Defence, Social, Economic, Psychological and Military; and these work together as the fingers on a hand. The question “Is this your hand?” is posed at the bottom of the posters.

Civil defence refers to the need for Singaporeans to be prepared to assist in civil emergencies, and social defence to racial and religious harmony, which are “bedrock principles of Singapore. What kind of face comes to mind when you think of the word

‘Singaporean?’ Is it Indian, Chinese, Malay, Eurasian? Is it all of them?” Economic defence stresses the importance of the work ethic, particularly for young Singaporeans, and psychological defence refers to a “continued belief in Singapore and its future.” Military defence discusses the role of the “first-class armed forces” and the necessity for all citizens to keep fit and take their required national service seriously. Each aspect ends with the phrase: “The future is in YOUR hands.”

The efficacy of such heavy-handed nationalist indoctrination is perhaps indicated in the new “Object Think” gallery, where a large “Scribbling Wall” from Singapore’s 2001 National Day is on display. The museum had set up a blank space on a wall and supplied pens for the public to inscribe whatever messages they felt appropriate. Mostly in English, the vast majority were variants on “Happy Birthday Singapore,” “Singapore will never die,” “Be strong. We’re all we’ve got,” and “Be better than the best!” In the same exhibition, negative reinforcement of the patriotic message is supplied, through displays of police riot gear used in the Communist riots and memorabilia from the tense period of confrontation with Indonesia. In the exhibition on secret societies, a constantly running video warns young Singaporeans against joining any kind of gang and shows a visit to a prison, where a rattan cane flogging of a gang member is graphically simulated. Both the necessity and advisability of social conformity are recurring themes in the museum.

Another strong theme is that of Chinese-Malay cooperation and amity, with far less attention paid to the Indian contribution to Singapore. A constantly running video shows a two-minute clip of Lee Kuan Yew at the press conference following the collapse of the merger with Malaysia, where he talks emotionally of his vision of a union of people sharing a common history and culture, before breaking off in tears. The definition of the Peranakans in the Rumah Baba exhibition stresses the historical continuity of links between Chinese and Malays, and an accompanying video talks of the community as a “blend of Chinese, Malay and, to a lesser extent, Indian.” The Indian community is implicitly marginalised further by the reference on a signboard to “intermarriages and contacts between the local and Indian communities,” as if the Indians were not themselves local. There are only half as many ethnic Indians as Malays in Singapore, but the most tempting explanation for their relative invisibility in the museum is Singapore’s geographical and demographic position as a small, mainly Chinese state between two much larger Malay ones. The exhibition on the 700-year history of Singapore is

similarly at pains to stress the Malay origins of Singapore as well as its historical trading links with visiting Chinese, claiming that Singapore has been “multi-racial since the 14th century.”

“The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds” is brazenly sensationalist, nationalistic and, to most non-Singaporeans, embarrassing. Saddled with a wincingly awful theme song and script that were, apparently, personally endorsed by Lee Kuan Yew, the film is far less careful to stress the Malay aspect of Singapore, emphasising instead the contribution of the Chinese. Its main message, though, is that of strident anti-communism, the fierce “Tiger of Communism” springing out of the screen to menace the audience at more or less appropriate moments. This cinematic representation of Communism by a tiger seems rather provocative, given the animal’s symbolic association with Malaysia (as alluded to even on the Singapore state crest), and undermines much of the conciliatory tone of other displays in the museum. The film was not meant to be a permanent feature of the museum, and I had the impression that the curatorial staff would love to see the back of it; but it is apparently very popular, I was told and, more importantly, “the Old Man likes it.”

## Overall Impression

“Basically,” sums up a Western diplomat stationed in Singapore and quoted by Stan Sesser, “the government doesn’t like anything it can’t control” (Sesser, 1993, p.57). The subject under discussion on this occasion was the freedom of the press, or the lack thereof, but the visitor to the Singapore National Museum tends to come away with very much the same impression. Rather than presenting different perspectives on or facilitating exploration of Singapore’s undeniably complex and fascinating history, the museum, as an integral part of the national education system, is obliged to toe the party line with respect to the official version. This results in an impeccably maintained and presented, but ultimately sterile and didactic atmosphere, in which national identity and achievement are prescribed rather than described. To be a good Singaporean, it is implied, is not to inherit a legacy so much as to follow a set of rules. The past is important, but less as something to be proud of than something to learn from; many of the lessons of history are negative examples, mistakes to be avoided in the future. Singapore as an independent nation is still a fragile entity, threatened by potentially

destructive forces both within and outside the country, and the National Museum, no less than individual citizens, has a duty to play a part in the “total defence” of the state.

An obvious problem for the museum in fulfilling its self-proclaimed mission of presenting the national culture of Singapore in historic terms is that it is hard to identify cultural factors uniquely indigenous to Singapore. Few traces exist of pre-colonial culture, and none of them can be demonstrated to have an unbroken connection to cultural practices today. Moreover, cultural patterns that developed during the colonial period are not purely Singaporean, the Peranakan tradition, for instance, belonging as much to Penang and Melaka as to Singapore. Celebrating Malay or Chinese (or Indian) cultural tradition, while useful in maintaining good community relations, hardly does much to advance the cause of a specifically Singaporean identity.

It is perhaps this lack of cultural depth in its national history that gives rise to the curious ambivalence that the museum manifests towards the period of British colonisation. Although the museum repeatedly emphasises Singapore’s pre-colonial existence, and certainly celebrates its struggle for independence from Britain, being critical of British policy on many occasions, it nevertheless devotes a great deal of gallery space and attention to former Residents and Governors. The huge bust of Raffles halfway up the staircase is the first object that the visitor sees on entering the museum, and Farquhar, the first Resident, has an entire gallery associated with his career and his natural history art collection. Even the first diorama, featuring the ruins of ancient Temasek and therefore demonstrating the antiquity of Singapore, shows their being surveyed by the British Resident of the time. The current temporary exhibition on “History on Canvas: Glimpses of the Past through Historical Paintings” has a few Singaporean landscapes, but by far its most impressive hangings are those of the British royal family, accompanied by 18th century string quartet background music and deeply respectful signboards (in English only) on the Queen’s pedigree and on the history of the British Empire. Even the museum building, it is proudly announced, was opened by Governor Weld in 1887, “Queen Victoria’s Jubilee Year.”

“Museums are not fixtures but creations; they influence, often subliminally, our whole view of culture” (Spalding, 2002, p.7). It is tempting to wonder, on the evidence of the Singapore History Museum’s rather odd emphasis on colonial pageantry, whether it is not trying to appropriate some aspects of a distinct culture which, while not its own, are nevertheless closely associated with it, and are no longer a threat. Lee Kuan Yew’s

claim for the existence of “Asian values” notwithstanding, he was educated in Britain and has many times expressed his admiration for certain elements of British culture. While it may be a mistake to associate him too closely with the policies of the National Museum, there is no doubt that much of contemporary Singapore is made in his image, and his influence on other aspects of the museum’s present appearance has been noted above.

The Singapore History Museum has recently been placed under a new Director, and there are likely to be reviews of the exhibition policies over the next couple of years. While there may be changes in the objects displayed and the styles of presentation, it is unlikely, given the authoritarian instincts of the Singapore government, that the general conception of the National Museum will alter much in the near future. Embedded in the educational system as it is, the museum is probably deemed too useful an instructional tool to become what it could be: a forum for questioning and for debate, where visitors could begin to appreciate the complexity of Singapore’s history, and where representatives of the different ethnic components of Singapore could confront competing interpretations of their common historical legacy.

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